



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Driven to Discover<sup>SM</sup>

# Maxine Hong Kingston

*How strange that the emigrant villagers are shouters, hollering face to face. My father asks, "Why is it I can hear Chinese from blocks away? Is it that I understand the language? Or is it that they talk loud?" They turn the radio up full blast to hear the operas, which do not seem to hurt their ears. And they yell over the singers that wail over the drums, everybody talking at once, big arm gestures, spit flying. You can see the disgust on American faces looking at women like that. It isn't just the loudness. It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly, to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words with the consonants and vowels as regular as Italian. We make guttural peasant noise and have Ton Duc Thang names you can't remember. And the Chinese can't hear Americans at all; the language is too soft and western music unheard. I've watched a Chinese audience laugh, visit, talk-story, and holler during a piano recital, as if the musician could not hear them. A Chinese-American, somebody's son, was playing Chopin, which has no punctuation, no cymbals, no gongs. Chinese piano music is five black keys. Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans. Once a year the teachers referred my sister and me to speech therapy, but our voices would straighten out, unpredictably normal, for the therapists. Some of us gave up, shook our heads, and said nothing, not one word. Some of us could not even shake our heads. At times shaking my head is more self-assertion than I can manage. Most of us eventually found some voice, however faltering. We invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl who could not speak up even in Chinese school.*

— The Woman Warrior

## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1927
- \* Chinese-American novelist, memoirist, and short story writer
- \* Wrote *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*

This page was researched and submitted by: Christina K. Soderstrom on 12/9/96.



# Maxine Hong Kingston

## Biography continued

Maxine Hong Kingston was born on October 27, 1940 in Stockton, California. She was the first of six American-born children; her parents, Tom and Ying Lan Hong, had had two children in China before they came to America. Her mother trained as a midwife in To Keung School of Midwifery in Canton. Her father had been brought up a scholar and taught in his village of Sun Woi, near Canton. Tom left China for America in 1924, but finding no work for a poet or calligrapher, he took a job in a laundry. Tom was swindled out of his share of the laundry, but Ying Lan joined him in 1939 in New York City, and they then moved to Stockton where Tom had been offered a job in a gambling house. Maxine was named after a lucky blond gambler who frequented his work.

Kingston's first language was Say Yup, a dialect of Cantonese. She grew up surrounded by other immigrants from her father's village, and the storytelling she heard as a child influenced her later writing. By the age of nine, her progress in English enabled her to write poems in her new language, and though she was a gifted storyteller like her mother, she preferred the solitary task of writing. An extremely bright student, she won eleven scholarships that allowed her to attend the University of California at Berkeley. Kingston began as an engineering major, but she soon switched to English literature. She received her B.A. degree in 1962 and her teaching certificate in 1965. In 1962, she married Earl L. Kingston, an actor, and they moved to Hawaii where they both taught for the next ten years.

In 1976, while Kingston was teaching creative writing at the Mid-Pacific Institute, a private school, she published her first book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. One reviewer, Michael T. Malloy, described the book as having an exotic setting but dealing with the same subjects as mainstream American feminist literature, specifically the "Me and Mom" genre. Other reviewers were surprised by its fresh subject matter and style, and they sang the praises of this poetic, fierce, delicate, original novel/memoir. Kingston strove for a Chinese rhythm to her voice, a typical Chinese-American speech, and rich imagery; her first book was a great success. In the end of *Woman Warrior*, her shy girl character finds resolution as she breaks female silence and inherits an oral tradition that she carries on as a written tradition.



# Maxine Hong Kingston

## Biography continued

Kingston's second book, *China Men*, published in 1980, was a companion to *Warrior Woman* and received more controversial reviews. The book, steeped in historic detail and set in early California and Hawaii, details the male influences of her life and describes the lives of the men in her family who came to America -- "Gold Mountain." *China Men* includes a chronological list of discriminatory laws regarding Chinese immigrants and celebrates the strengths and achievements of the first Chinese men in America as well as the exploitation and prejudice they faced. Several sinologists complained that Kingston reconstructed myths that are only remotely connected to original Chinese legends and that her pieces don't accurately portray high culture. Kingston responded to this criticism by explaining that she is not trying to represent Chinese culture, she is simply trying to portray her own experiences. She points to William Carlos Williams as one of the influences of *China Men*.

In 1987, Kingston published a collection of twelve prose selections, *Hawaii One Summer*. After the success of her first books, she was financially able to give up teaching as an occupation and continued to write, but she continued to teach on and off as a visiting professor in Hawaii, Michigan, and California. In 1988, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, a picaresque novel set in the San Francisco area during the 1960s, was published. The protagonist of this novel, Wittman Ah Sing, is a fifth-generation Chinese-American, and like many of Kingston's characters, he struggles to escape racism as he grows and questions the world around him. Reviews of this novel again were mixed, but critics seem to have had stronger reactions against this book than against *China Men*.

For Maxine Hong Kingston, writing has been central in her life. "My writing is an ongoing function, like breathing or eating," she explains. "I have this habit of writing things down. Anything. And then some of it falls into place as in these two books [*China Men* and *Woman Warrior*]" (Yalom 13). She admires the changes a storyteller can implement when he or she tells the same tale many times, and in her work, she tries to retain this freedom to change a story's interpretation by guarding ambiguity in the static writing. Doubt is a part of every story, not certainty, and that is part of what makes her writing unique.



# Maxine Hong Kingston

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

*To Be The Poet* (2002).

Editor of *The Literature of California: Native American Beginnings to 1945*, Volume 1 (2000).

*Conversations With Maxine Hong Kingston* (1998).

*Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989).

*Hawaii One Summer* (1987).

*China Men* (1980).

*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976).

### Works about the author

Cheung, King-Kok. *Articulate silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Cornell University Press, 1993).

Ferraro, Thomas J. *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

Janette, Michele. "The Angle We're Joined At: A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston" (*Transition*, 1997).

Lesniak, James and Susan Trosky, eds. "Maxine Hong Kingston" in *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series* (Gale Research, 1993).

Moritz, Charles, ed. "Maxine Hong Kingston" in *Current Biography Yearbook* (H.W. Wilson, 1990).

Pollack, Harriet, ed. *Having Our Way: Women Rewriting Tradition in Twentieth-Century America* (Bucknell University Press, 1995).

Rainwater, Catherine, and William J. Scheick, eds. *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies* (University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

Smith, Sidonie, ed. *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Indiana University Press, 1987).

TuSmith, Bonnie. *All My Relatives: Community and Individualism in Ethnic American Literatures* (University of Michigan Press, 1993).

Yalom, Marilyn, ed. *Women Writers of the West Coast: Speaking of their Lives and Careers* (Capra Press, 1983).